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SUBJECT: GOVERNMENT BLAMES LTTE FOR JAFFNA HUMANITARIAN
CRISIS; ANNOUNCES PLAN FOR PRIVATE SECTOR TO HELP

REF: COLOMBO 1812

¶1. (SBU) Minister of Healthcare and Nutrition and lead peace negotiator DeSilva briefed the Sri Lankan Diplomatic Corps on November 2 on the outcome of the peace talks and government plans to mobilize the private sector to help meet humanitarian needs in Jaffna. DeSilva disagreed with press characterizations that the talks had been a failure noting that it would be unrealistic to expect quick solutions to a problem that had lasted more than 30 years. He said the talks in Geneva had been cordial, which augured well for future talks, and had focused on a political settlement and humanitarian issues.

¶2. (SBU) With respect to a political settlement DeSilva expressed satisfaction with the interaction that had taken place. He said the LTTE had welcomed the southern consensus produced by the SLFP-UNP agreement. He also said talks marked the first serious discussion between the two sides on a political settlement. He provided no further details on the content of the political settlement discussions. (Ambassador will attend a briefing for Co-Chair Ambassadors by Norwegian Ambassador Brattskar on Friday November 3 where we expect to get more details.)

¶3. (SBU) DeSilva blamed the LTTE for humanitarian difficulties in Jaffna. He disputed LTTE claims that the A-9 road to Jaffna was closed. He said the road was not closed; only the northern Omantai checkpoint is closed. He pointed out that if the government truly intended to starve the LTTE it would have closed the road at a checkpoint further south. DeSilva further contended that the only reason for the closure of the Omantai checkpoint was that the LTTE had begun mortar shelling of the area on August 11. Before then, the checkpoint had been open. DeSilva also echoed long-standing GSL complaints that every truck proceeding through LTTE territory had to pay a 500,000 rp. (USD 5,000) tax. DeSilva told the gathering that the GSL wants to ship food to Jaffna, but requires security guarantees. He pointed out that UN Under Secretary General Egeland likewise had stated the UN's

readiness to provide relief by sea, but also needs LTTE security assurances before doing so. DeSilva concluded that these points demonstrate that the LTTE is intentionally preventing food from reaching Jaffna to try to score points against the government. He nonetheless stated that the government is determined to deliver food and other supplies to Jaffna as soon as modalities can be worked out.

14. (U) DeSilva concluded by stating the GSL's readiness to return to negotiations even if there is not a full cease fire in place. He complained that the LTTE had already broken the cease fire and reiterated that the GSL has no plans to initiate offensive actions, but will continue to defend itself if fired on.

15. (SBU) Minister of Enterprise Development and Investment Promotion Bogollagama then announced plans by the government to mobilize the Sri Lankan private sector to help relieve humanitarian conditions in Jaffna. He said the government had asked the private sector to provide ships that can carry humanitarian cargoes from the ports of Colombo and Trincomalee to three ports in northern Sri Lanka. He said the government aims to send 20,000 metric tons of food per month to Jaffna starting in November. He noted parenthetically that the government also was planning to bring 3,000 metric tons from Chennai. Ambassador Blake asked Bogollagama why the government thought the private sector would be willing to ship supplies to the north when the ICRC and UN refused to do so in the absence of security guarantees from the LTTE. Bogollagama responded that the Navy would provide security and that insurance arrangements would also need to be worked out.

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16. (SBU) Comment: While the government clearly is looking for ways to help relieve the situation in Jaffna, it does not appear that they have fully thought through how such a private sector mechanism could work in practice. If ships flagged by the ICRC and the UN are reluctant to brave the passage to Jaffna, it is unlikely that private ships will do so even with the protection of the Navy. Ambassador will host a co-chair meeting on November 7 to prepare for the November 20th co-chairs meeting in Washington. We will use that occasion to seek co-chair Ambassador consensus on a way forward to resolve the Jaffna humanitarian impasse.
BLAKE